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ABSTRACT

The intellectual content of freshman English includes both the subject of writing itself and the subject the student writes about. Writing has often focused on personal subjects with the assumption that the student knows himself or herself and that the student has developed a point of view allowing intelligent writing. A second source of subject matter has been literature partly because the teachers are well-qualified in this field. Usually, however, time has to be spent teaching subject-area information and methodology so students will have something to say. Some double courses in literature and writing have arisen to help solve the problems of trying to teach two contents in a limited time. It is equally possible to teach double courses in economics and composition or in business administration and composition. By redefining the freshman English course with the importance of its intellectual content firmly in mind, it should be possible to expand composition offerings beyond the first year of college with the intellectual content reflecting the relation of the liberal arts to non-liberal arts studies. (TJ)

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The Intellectual Content of Freshman English*

Beginnings, as Henry James once wrote, are usually small things, but continuations are not always strikingly great ones. Insofar as the present inquiry is a beginning, it is indeed small, but so far a continuation, not strikingly great. Indeed in one respect it is not a beginning at all, because the intellectual content of freshman English as it pertains strictly to the act of writing is now well researched: witness Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schorer's Research in Written Composition in 1963, Gary Tate's well-edited Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays in 1976, and Richard Larson's "Selected Bibliography of Research and Writing about the Teaching of Composition" for the years beginning in 1973 in CCC. Yet in another respect it is entirely new, because in the process of transformation from the ugly stepchild of English studies to its beautiful darling, English composition appeared more complex than before, and instead of a unitary nature, we are slowly discovering a binary one. A single unwanted child becomes a pair of fascinating twins. To be plain about it, English composition has not just one intellectual content, but two: the subject of writing itself, already widely researched, and the subject the student writes about, now largely neglected. There may have been a certain kind of wisdom in steering clear of the second sort of intellectual content, since it raises questions that reach beyond the typical English department's purview: the relation of the liberal arts to the new vocationalism, the interdisciplinary nature of doctoral education in English, the structure of academia, and the role of the colleges and universities in society.

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In an inquiry of small beginnings and modest continuations, such profound issues can be touched upon though never plumbed; yet, too, the relations of the issues to my topic might be traced, however lightly, to be filled in, altered, more clearly defined and certainly tested by others devoted to the universal democratic intellectual act of writing.

At its broadest extent, my topic relates to the aims of education, about which Alfred North Whitehead wrote that education should turn out the pupil with something he knows well and something he can do well. This statement has curious implications for freshman English, because even a careful study like William Linn's (which shows that basic knowledge of grammar and rhetoric correlates with better performance of student writers) does not claim grammar and rhetoric for a subject of students' papers.[1] In simpler language, the student needs certain knowledge about the skill of writing, but this is not the knowledge which constitutes the other half of Whitehead's equation, the something he knows well. The student is supposed to emerge from freshman English with something he can do well--writing; yet the irony is that such a student will have to know writing, so to speak, in an elementary sense in order to do it, and in addition know well a subject other than writing in order to write well. This is not a small bill of fare. And the disregard of one-half of the bill may have something to do with dissatisfaction about performance in freshman English.

Not one of the bibliographic essays in Tate's book on teaching composition deals directly with the subject of student writing, and the topic escaped notice of Josephine Miles in her "What We Already Know About Composition and What We Need to Know."[2] Yet the topic appears in scattered places: there is an argument that students write better on matters of interest to them, that business and technical writing (with the obvious

advantage of ready-made subjects) are eminently teachable, and that subjects ranging from movies to folklore to popular culture provide stimulating and engaging subjects for college writing.[3] These studies are valuable (indeed my selection is illustrative not comprehensive), but they do not emerge as a significant aspect of research in composition such as, for instance, "Linguistics and Composition" does in W. Ross Winterowd's survey in the Tate volume. The reason that the intellectual content of freshman English has yet to emerge as a significant research topic may be deep, though not beyond the grasp of a reasonable person.

The reason may be sought in Kenneth J. Kantor's historical study of "Creative Expression in the English Curriculum," which demonstrates a longevity as old as this century for our interest in fostering the student's imagination, and in Glenn Matott's "The Search for a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition," which argues that a kind of philosophy of alienation supports recent emphasis on egocentric writing.[4] Associated with these views, perhaps, are Richard A. Lanham's stylistic program in which writing becomes a means by which the student writer can reveal personality and Richard L. Larson's invention techniques by which one discovers one's world.[5] Programs for writing based on personal experience which call for narratives, or for fiction and poetry, of which there are many, would agree with the bias in English studies in favor of imagination, be supported by a philosophy of alienation, and mesh quite well with both the Lanham and the Larson programs for egocentric writing. The subject for student composition in such a world could well be--indeed probably is in many cases--what I did last summer.

This time-honored topic--by now a joke with national currency in and out of academy, as a Peanuts cartoon once suggested--should not be passed over lightly, but not solemnly either. There are some important assumptions about your experience last summer which your composition instructor probably

did not reveal: (1) you know what you did last summer, and (2) you have developed a point of view on that experience which will allow you to write intelligently about it. Your instructor depended on these two assumptions; the business of the classroom was to learn composition skills by which your informed opinion about last summer might be transformed into decent English prose. If your instructor was a rhetorician, you learned invention; if not, the steps of pre-writing. These methods are birds of a feather. What they have in common is important: for instance, invention means in its root sense a discovery, as in the Empress Helena's invention of the Cross. Helena did not create the Cross; she found or discovered it, because it was already there. So, too, as you took your last summer through the elegant steps of invention, you were supposed to discover your opinion about those fateful three months and dig out some evidence to show that your opinions were worthwhile. Helena had several centuries of Christian civilization behind her to help her form an opinion about the Cross; all you had was registration and orientation week. Helena knew where to dig for the Cross and found it; you had no idea where to dig, your instructor kept telling you that you would find it if you just used the methods of invention properly, you dug some more, and pretty soon the excavation fell in on you, an unpleasant experience to be sure. Had you the courage, you might have asked your instructor for a means by which you could judge last summer; perhaps it wasn't worth writing about. The process of forming an opinion about a subject is not the same as that by which you transform this opinion into non-fiction prose, although it is probably true that your opinion is tested and often reshaped to some degree as it is batted back and forth like a ball between the two courts of play--reflection and writing.

Lest my tone betray me, I acknowledge that personal experience is a

respectable subject for student compositions, but I also aver that it is extremely difficult. There is a branch of learning devoted to the meaning of personal experience to which great and good minds have been attracted: Freud, Sanger, Erikson and Coles are examples, and of them Erikson's work on the human life cycle the most accessible. I think it is fair to assert that, had your instructor taught you the elements of Erikson's theory, you could have judged your last summer's experience from an interesting point of view; whether you agreed with Erikson or not, the procedure could well have caused you to form an opinion. But this is all before pre-writing or invention, and it provides you something to discover to write about. It could also, obviously, prove to you that last summer was just as dull and uneventful as you thought it was, but the juxtaposition of Eriksonian expectations against the bland experience could be cause for an ironical essay, too. Here, of course, I am advocating something heretical, for which I do not recant: that an interesting idea can be useful in reclaiming certain lost territories of experience. As you can tell, our composition class is becoming decidedly interdisciplinary in nature.

Perhaps an equally tempting approach to personal experience is to study myth which is generally considered to tell as much about humanity as dreams do about an individual. If we agree with Lord Raglan that a ritual is an enactment of a myth, then students may be interested to discover ritualistic elements in their experience last summer and search for a mythic interpretation. For the heroic student, there is Joseph Campbell's monomyth in which meaning in life is achieved through valiant struggle.[6] The same ironic option pertains here as with the project above.

That such procedures do not commonly occur in composition courses need not mean they cannot--indeed, my examples are only suggestions, hardly pre-

scriptions. When selecting personal experience or any other subject as the intellectual content of freshmen English, two criteria apply: (1) is the content something which we can assume is the general possession of most students (e.g., they were consciously aware last summer), and (2) is there a methodology by which this content can be successfully examined by a person relatively unacquainted with rigorous thinking. This sets the stage for the act before invention; this stage is pre-pre-writing. It is an open question--but one subject to empirical research--if there is indeed any common intellectual possession of most students, which is not to say that their minds are not full of ideas (which they are) but that they may not recognize the commonality of their ideation, if you will pardon the barbarism. It could be argued that this is precisely what an education provides--a means of seeing relation between ideas--though this, too, might be empirically tested. But here again I stray into another pasture.

That I err into other areas of the academy will not surprise anyone who is keeping up with any of the latest research in composition. For instance, in a forthcoming issue of Language and Style, W. Ross Winterowd in "Brain, Rhetoric, and Style: An Exploratory Essay" will join "an ecuminical endeavor involving neurologists, neurosurgeons, biochemists, and linguists, and psychologists [which has] . . . much to contribute to rhetoric and stylistics."[7] As composition develops as a major area of interest for literary scholars, and as research in composition becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, the isolation which English studies has enjoyed in the heyday when special commentary on literary classics was its nearly exclusive activity will necessarily cease. As research about writing advances, conditions should be favorable for new ideas and new testing of these ideas about the intellectual content of freshman English. It remains to be seen, but it should be interesting to watch, which subjects might be proposed, adopted, and find favor.

It stands to reason that some experienced composition instructors, particularly those whose doctoral training was aimed at producing special commentary (criticism, editing, literary history, etc.) will not import subjects from other disciplines into their classrooms, but discover, like the Empress Helena, that something quite valuable is already there. This is a subject for which they will be well qualified and for which they will probably have a passion: literature. If literature rather than, say, economics, is the subject of composition, it shares with this and other difficult subjects a problem not encountered with the subject of personal experience. It cannot be assumed that the students are knowledgeable about literature, nor economics, so part of the course must be devoted to serious study. Then, as with personal experience being the subject, the course must allow for instruction in a methodology for treating the subject--in the case of literature, one might expect some of the elements of practical criticism. In any event, it seems certain that a course devoted to <u>both</u> writing and an academic subject will be unsatisfactory if it is fitted into too few hours; programs which call for double courses in literature and writing, literature and economics, etc., would appear to be necessary. If my suggestion about the importance of intellectual content finds favor, it is entirely conceivable that double courses for writing will be the rule, even if the subject is personal experience, since the importance of methodology will be obvious for treating <u>any</u> subject. But surely with any subject, other than personal experience, a double course is mandatory; otherwise, the instructor will be, in the idiom of northwest Ohio, busier than a one-armed paper-hanger. And, I might add to this bizarre image, the instructor would have an equal chance of success, not to mention the poor students.

For those whose doctoral training is underway, or for those who will enter the cursus honorum soon, emphasis on composition is already a part of the program, though in varying degrees of importance. For those who choose composition as a major portion of their advanced study, if the intellectual content of freshman English is important, interdisciplinary study appears absolutely necessary. For prospective instructors who already know they favor the subject of personal experience, cognate study in fields which offer perspectives on personal experience seems appropriate. Other routes by which competence in a non-literary subject can be achieved include a double major at the master's degree level (English and business administration, for example). Such cognate or second subject preparation fits candidates with a doctorate to deal directly with the new vocationalism, once a trend but now an established pattern. In terms of subject matter, the instructor will be able to meet students on their own ground and gain their respect; having done so, it would hardly be surprising if those same students were to choose literature courses from someone they already know. There are many avenues to literary study, and such intructors could pave the way to literature for many vocationally oriented students. It is also possible that those who already hold a doctorate might be retained according to this new light, rather than attend retreading seminars which prepare them for non-academic jobs.

If the intellectual content of freshman English becomes an active area of research in composition, research will turn an important corner. To this observer, a current content-free composition program, curriculum and research endeavor appears much like the study of bibliography for its own sake--of great interest to the expert, but lost on those for whom its interest would be

to use it to explore a given subject or field. What good is a cataloging system if you do not use it to store and retrieve books or information? Or, to shift my analogy, current research in composition appears much like research in linguistics shortly after the appearance of Chomsky's influential Syntactic Structures. Chomsky, in his revolt against the structuralists, had not yet freed his theory from the structuralist assumption that the purpose of linguistics was to investigate form, not content; his theory reached maturity when he began to include content, or semantics, along with syntax and phonology. So too composition research focuses almost exclusively on writing--its form, rhetoric, dialectical problems, the psychology of the writer, etc. It is reasonable to predict that, if intellectual content is subjected to theoretical speculation and empirical testing, not only will a new category be added to the successor volume of Tate's 10 Bibliographical Essays, but this eleventh newcomer might in some way influence its older siblings.

To borrow the jargon of general research, we know very little right now about the parameters of the intellectual content of freshman English, much less about the interface between it and the other ten branches of research in composition. It is entirely possible that certain kinds of rhetoric, for example, are more appropriate to one subject than to another. The tip of this iceberg can be seen in Fred H. Macintosh's "Technical Writing for the World's Work."[8] Certain kinds of composition already seem to belong to certain kinds of subjects: for example, technical writing, journalism, and literary criticism. It is possible that if a writing instructor knows one kind of writing well (e.g., literary criticism), and teaches it to his students, they may write poorly because it is not appropriate to a certain subject (e.g., personal experience). This is not to say that literary scholars, the expert scribes of our society, can not teach students or even scholars

in other fields how to improve their writing. For instance, Herman Struck in his "Wanted: More Writing Courses for Graduate Students" describes a course for dissertation writers in non-English fields.[9] And if writing instruction is profitable for such graduate students (which it was), it should be profitable for undergraduates in majors other than English. In other words, one cause of a college senior's lapse in writing skills may be a lack of occasion to write after freshman English. To make a familiar analogy, a freshman coming out of a composition course is very like a graduate student coming out of a foreign language exam; unless they both continue to practice their intellectual skills, in two or three years the one will be a rusty writer, the other an embarrassed scholar. Indeed, on the subject of foreign languages in doctoral programs, it is interesting to speculate that some programs might allow the candidate to substitute serious work in a second or cognate field for a foreign language. Not only would this study prepare one for composition courses both in and beyond the basic freshman diet, but also it would provide a research tool for investigation of the intellectual content of composition courses if my proposal for this field finds favor.

We need to redefine freshman English with the importance of its intellectual content firmly in mind. Once we find success in this basic course, we will be able to expand our composition offerings to students beyond the first year of college. The exact nature of the intellectual content--personal experience, a liberal arts subject, a vocacional subject (sometimes termed "professional")--will be a reflection of the relation of the liberal arts to non-liberal arts studies. How this relation is fashioned is something in which we can take an active interest by offering interdisciplinary doctoral training for composition specialists and advanced composition courses for

non-English majors while at the same time advocating courses in writing about literature for all college students. We can preserve our study of literary classics and advance the cause of the universal democratic intellectual act of writing. In this way English will remain the flagship of the liberal arts committed to educating people to be critically reasonable and reasonably critical of their own culture, particularly the literary aspect of it. I suggest that a first step in this direction would be to devote research to the intellectual content of freshman English, so that in the course that is generally the student's first in liberal arts there will be a genuine subject about which to be critical and reasonable.

NOTES

[1]William J. Linn, "Contrastive Approaches: An Experiment in Pedagogical Technique," CE, 38 (1976), 144-152.

[2]Josephine Miles, CCC, 27 (1976), 136-141.

[3]Robert P. Parker and Leslie Meskin, "Who Says Johnny Can't Write?" English Journal, 65 (1976), 42-46; Deborah C. Andrews, "An Interdisciplinary Course in Technical Communication," Technical Communication, 25 (1976), 12-15; W. Keats Sparrow, "Six Myths About 'Writing for Business and Industry,'" The Technical Writing Teacher, 3 (1976), 49-59; Ralph A. Cohen, "Reading and Writing Movie Reviews in Freshman English," Freshman English News, 4 (1975), 3-4, 11; Edgar F. Daniels, "The Movie Review as a First Step in Research," in Writing Exercises from Exercise Exchange, edited by Littleton Long (Urbana: NCTE, 1976), pp. 131-132; Lee Haring and Ellen Foreman, "Folklore in the Freshman Writing Course," CE, 37 (1975), 13-21; Raymond J. Rodrigues, "Folklore: An Unlimited Writing Source," in On Righting Writing, edited by Ouida Clapp (Urbana: NCTE, 1975), pp. 37-39; "Popular Culture and the Teaching of English," special issue of Arizona English Bulletin, 17, no 3 (1975), passim.

[4]Kenneth J. Kantor, "Creative Expression in the English Curriculum: An Historical Perspective," Research in the Teaching of English, 9 (1975), 5-29; Glenn Matott, "The Search for a Philosophical Context for Teaching Composition," CCC, 27 (1976), 25-31.

[5]Richard A. Lanham, Style: An Anti-Textbook (New Haven: Yale, 1974); Richard L. Larson, "Invention: Discovering One's World," Kansas English, 59 (1973), 18-24.

[6]For mythic studies of the athlete, see The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life, edited by Robert J. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 9-92; I am indebted to the editors' phraseology on p. 9.

[7]I thank Professor Winterowd for allowing me to read this essay in its manuscript form.

[8]In The Teaching of Technical Writing, edited by Donald H. Cunningham and Herman A. Estrin (Urbana: NCTE, 1975), pp. 23-33.

[9]CCC, 27 (1976), 192-197.